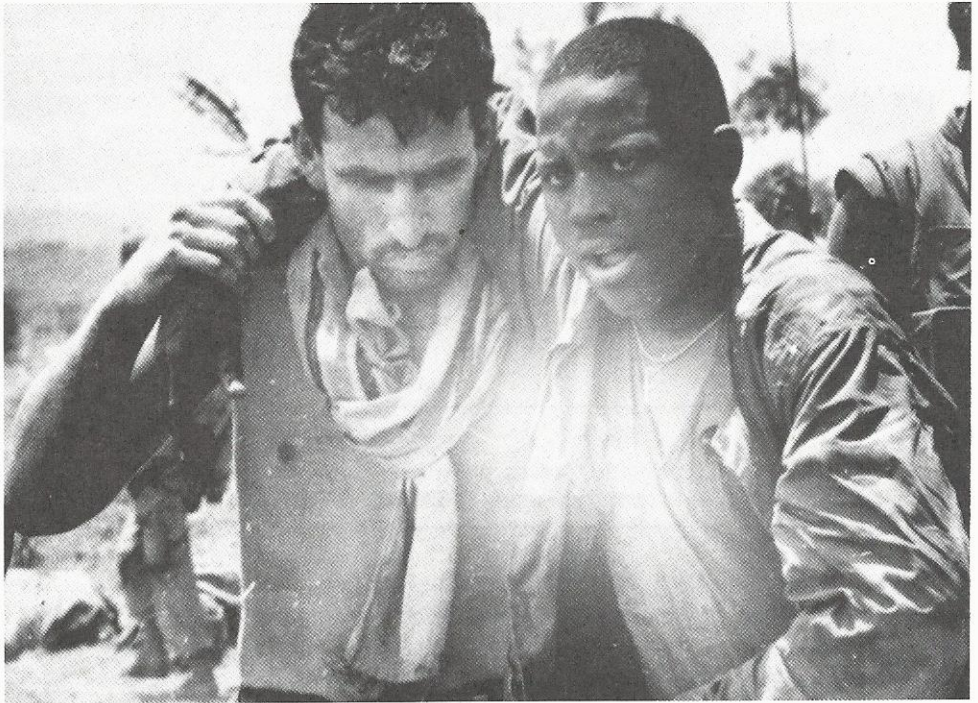


## WHO FOUGHT FOR THE U.S.



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### Who Fought In The War

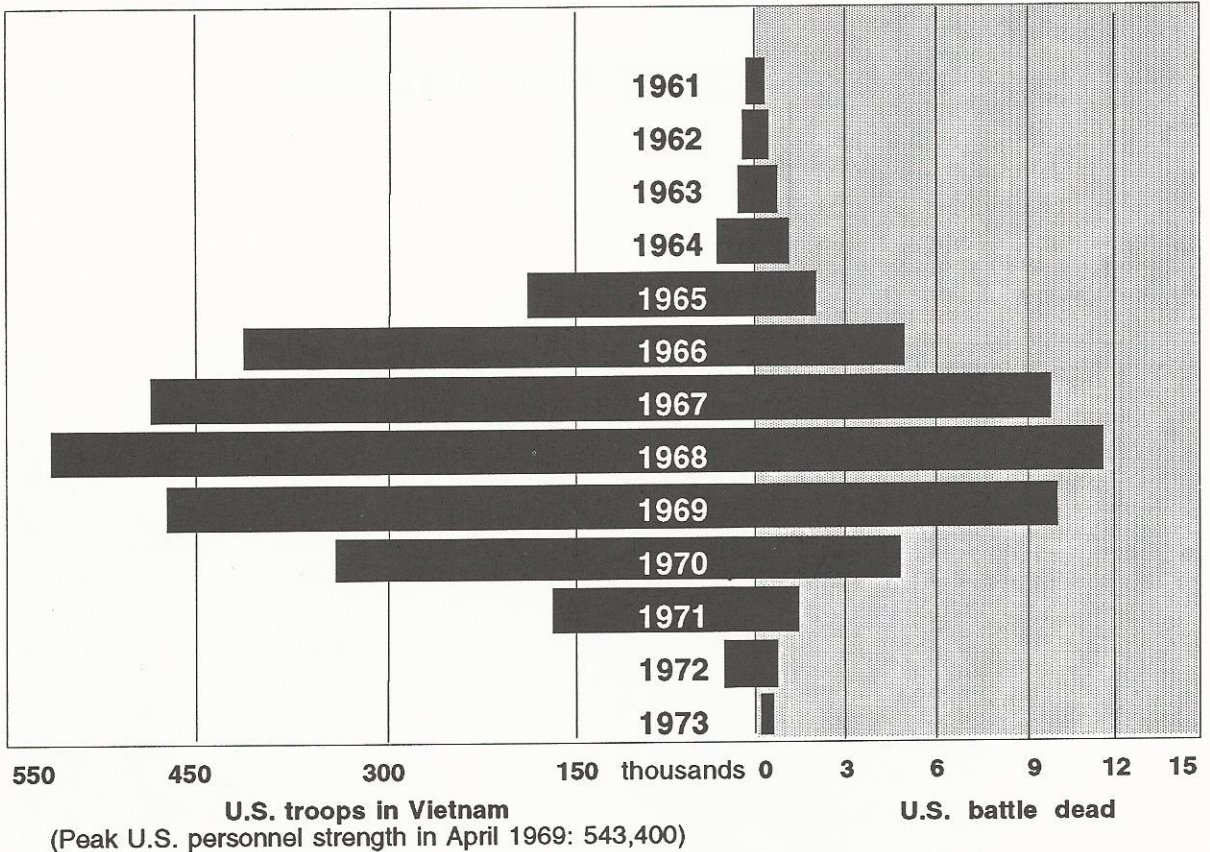
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Who are the soldiers who fight in their nation's war? Who will be the nameless men to serve under the famous generals whose names we all learn? From what cities, towns, and villages do they come? What fate awaits them? Would you become a soldier? Why would you fight in a war?

Imagine yourself an 18-year old high school senior just prior to graduation. The time is the late 1960s and the war in Vietnam is going strong. How do you plan your future? What are your goals? A local college? A major university? A good job? Your own car? Do you have a girlfriend? Plans for marriage? Perhaps you are considering a tour of military service, even a military career. Add to this dilemma of choice the prospect of being sent across the world to Vietnam to fight in an increasingly unpopular war with a rising casualty rate. What would you do?

In this chapter, we will look at the choices that young American males were willing and able to make regarding service in Vietnam and what consequences this had for the composition of our armed forces and the combat effectiveness of our troops. Before we do, however, let us briefly review the chain of events, largely ignored by the American people, that eventually led to service in Vietnam for millions of their sons.

## YEAR-END U.S. TROOP STRENGTH AND BATTLE DEAD, 1961 -1973



As discussed in the first three chapters, the war between France and Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh was settled by the 1954 Geneva Accords. This agreement ended about 100 years of French rule in Vietnam. It called for elections to unify North and South Vietnam under one government in 1956. Fearing Ho Chi Minh's popularity, especially in the more unified North, South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem refused to permit such elections to be held. He was supported in this decision by the Eisenhower administration. On January 3, 1957, the International Control Commission reported that neither North nor South had honored the Geneva Accords. It was war again in Vietnam.

On November 8, 1960, John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States. At the time, the U.S. had 685 military advisors in South Vietnam. On December 20, 1960, the National Liberation Front of Vietnam (NLF) was formed and accelerated guerrilla actions throughout the south.

In May 1961, President Kennedy assigned U.S. Special Forces (Green Berets) to Vietnam. Early in 1962 Kennedy established the American Military Assistance Command in South Vietnam. By year's end there were 4,000 U.S. military advisors in Vietnam.

South Vietnam's President Diem proved to be a ruthless and unpopular leader. He had to put down two attempts to overthrow him by members of his own army. During May and June 1963, the Buddhists staged huge demonstrations against the government. Several priests set themselves on fire to express their protest. One such dramatic suicide provoked demonstrations all over Saigon.

President Kennedy assigned the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to consult with a group of mutinous South Vietnamese generals seeking to oust Diem. On November 1, 1963, Diem was assassinated. Thousands cheered the news, but Saigon was still divided.

On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy himself

was assassinated. While a nation mourned, President Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the reins of government. By the time of his death, Kennedy had increased U.S. troop strength in Vietnam to about 20,000. The Air Force had flown 7,000 missions. Nevertheless, the NLF exercised some degrees of control, including taxation, in more than two-thirds of the villages and all but three of South Vietnam's forty-four provinces. President Johnson would now have to decide what course the U.S. would take in Vietnam.

Johnson was advised that defending an independent non-communist state in South Vietnam would take many more U.S. troops. However, the Constitution of the United States requires a declaration of Congress to establish a state of war. It was precisely the purpose of our founding fathers to demand a thorough public debate before such a hazardous commitment could be made. President Johnson escaped this condition by using the authority implied by the August 7, 1964, "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution" to wage war in Vietnam. (See chapters 2 and 3 for a fuller discussion of this decision and its legal implications.) This maneuver proved to be a double-edged sword. The lack of a formal declaration of war by Congress meant that Johnson was not free to mobilize all forces for a total commitment. Rather, he was faced with the challenge of raising an army within the constraints of a peace-time military conscription policy that allowed numerous deferments from service.

President Johnson turned to the member countries of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), established in 1954 to defend all member states (including Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam) against aggression by communist nations. While Pakistan declined to participate, three SEATO member countries did send combat troops. For several years Thailand provided over 11,000 troops, Australia almost 8,000, and New Zealand over 500. Total "third nation" forces reached 70,000 in 1969, more than the 39,000 sent to Korea, but fewer than were needed. They had a combined total of 5,000 deaths during the course of the war. Such support was costly, however. The U.S. had to pay Thailand about \$50 million per year and the Philippines about \$39 million per year in compensation for their assistance.

France and Great Britain refused to provide any military support to the U.S. In fact, President Charles DeGaulle and Prime Minister Harold Wilson actively counseled the U.S. against prosecuting the war and

worked for years to promote a negotiated settlement. The only country outside of SEATO to send troops was South Korea. Its contingent of almost 50,000 soldiers was spread across the coastal area of the northern half of the country. Local inhabitants considered the South Koreans the most brutal force in the war. Between 1965 and 1970, South Korea charged the U.S. \$1 billion for this military assistance.

The failure to convince most of our allies to send troops to Vietnam meant that the brunt of the fighting had to be carried by American and South Vietnamese soldiers. The government placed a one-year limit on tours of duty in Vietnam to encourage enlistment. American troops in Vietnam increased to 125,000 in 1965, 358,000 in 1966, and a peak of 543,000 in 1969. Thereafter, the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam declined as President Richard M. Nixon's "Vietnamization" program transferred more responsibility for the ground fighting to the South Vietnamese. Nevertheless, the one-year limit required such a frequent turnover of troops that, by the time the last American soldier left Vietnam, 2.15 million had served. By 1973, all U.S. troops were gone; and on April 30, 1975, the war ended with victory by the combined forces of North Vietnam and the NLF.

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## The Early Years: Volunteers and Victories

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During the early years of the U.S. military buildup, most of the soldiers sent to Vietnam were professionals or volunteers. They trained together and were sent by troop ship across the Pacific to fight together. The professional soldiers, especially the non-commissioned officers (NCOs), looked forward to the opportunity to gain combat experience. Morale was high and some observers commented that this was one of the finest fighting forces ever assembled.

The first major battle took place in the fall of 1965 in the Ia Drang Valley of the Central Highlands. Some 1,500-1,800 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers were killed in action there, contrasted to fewer than 300 soldiers of the U.S. Army's First Cavalry Division. The more than five-to-one kill ratio reflected the compe-

tence of the American forces.

"Vietnam: The War is Worth Winning," stated an editorial headline in the February 25, 1965 issue of *Life* magazine. The editorial went on to note that "there is a reasonably good chance the present phase of the war can be successfully wound up in 1967 or even in late 1966....The war in Vietnam is...about the future of Asia. It is very possibly as important as any of the previous American wars of this century."

At the time of the editorial, there were about 200,000 Americans in Vietnam. Some 125,000 had been there less than six months and about 50,000 were engaged in combat. About 1,400 had been killed and 6,000 wounded. Casualties were small enough and volunteerism high enough to give credibility to the administration's reassurances that a successful war effort could be managed without great public sacrifice. In a 1966 survey of high school sophomores, only 7 percent said the draft or Vietnam were problems that concerned them.

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## The Troop Buildup and the Draft

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By the end of 1966, there were 400,000 American troops in Vietnam. The casualty toll had reached over 5,000 Americans killed in action and 16,000 wounded. Many of the enlisted men already had served their one-year tour of duty and were now rotating back to the States to be reassigned to other units. Their slots increasingly were being filled by soldiers recruited through the Selective Service System. As more soldiers were needed, more reliance was placed upon the draft.

By December 1966, the draft call was up to 40,000 men each month. Many of these soldiers were assigned to combat units upon their arrival, knowing only those people they had met in-flight. They lacked the security of serving alongside guys from basic training. Many of these draftees simply did not want to be there and a lot of them were being sent straight into combat. Morale problems began to surface. By 1970, draftees comprised 39 percent of the troops but almost 55 percent of the combat deaths.

Almost everyone of the Vietnam generation, whether or not they served in the military, was emotion-



President Nixon's draft lottery in action

ally affected by the war. As one author noted, "Vietnam was the most divisive time of battle in our country since the Civil War." It's easy to imagine yourself a hero when there is no immediate threat, but young Americans were being killed in Vietnam. Moreover, the only way to survive such a situation was to be willing to kill, an act that does not come easily to most. Many young Americans simply were not moved to such great sacrifice by the cause of Vietnam. The issue for almost all male youth, then, was whether to enlist or how to avoid the draft. For millions, this meant a confrontation with their local Selective Service ("draft") board.

Established in 1917 for World War I, local draft boards were authorized to grant deferments and exemptions to individuals who were conscripted in their area. By the 1960s, the Selective Service System included about 4,000 local draft boards. These boards were staffed by unpaid civilian volunteers, usually older

white, middle-class men who were veterans of World Wars I and II.

As the war ground on, these local boards found themselves less and less able to meet their quotas of soldiers for Vietnam. A major reason was that there were numerous deferments and exemptions from military service built into the peacetime Selective Service law enacted in 1948. In addition to deferments for reasons of family, health, and religious principles, the law also provided deferments for occupations considered to be "in the national interest," especially those in the fields of health, education, religion, and agriculture. The following is a list of Selective Service classifications that could be assigned:

- I-A Available for military service
- I-A-O Conscientious objector available for noncombatant military service only
- I-C Member of the armed forces of the United States, the Coast and Geodetic Survey, or the Public Health Service
- I-D Member of reserve component or student taking military training
- I-O Conscientious objector available for civilian work contributing to the maintenance of the national health, safety, or interest
- I-S Student deferred by statute (High School)
- I-Y Registrant available for military service, but qualified for military service only in the event of war or national emergency
- I-W Conscientious objector performing civilian work contributing to the maintenance of the national health, safety, or interest
- II-A Registrant deferred because of civilian occupation (except agriculture or activity in study)
- II-C Registrant deferred because of agricultural occupation
- II-S Registrant deferred because of activity in study
- III-A Registrant with a child or children; registrant deferred by reason of extreme hardship to dependents

- IV-A Registrant who has completed service; sole surviving son
- IV-B Official deferred by law
- IV-C Alien
- IV-D Minister of religion or divinity student
- IV-F Registrant not qualified for any military service
- V-A Registrant over the age of liability for military service

Of the 26.8 million Vietnam era draft-age men, some 15.4 million, over 57 percent, were deferred, exempted, or disqualified from military service. Another 570,000, or 2 percent, committed draft violations. Over 200,000 were reported to federal prosecutors. Of these, 8,750 were convicted, 3,250 of whom went to prison. Another 3,000 went into hiding. Up to 100,000 fled the country. All of these young men also might be considered casualties of the war. For purposes of the war effort, however, the relevant figure is that almost 60 percent of the eligible population escaped military service entirely during the Vietnam era.

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## How to Avoid Vietnam

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One course to avoid military service was to do so on principle by claiming conscientious objection. This course usually required extensive documentation by religious authorities. Moreover, almost all of the 172,000 young Americans who did qualify for such classification had to work for two years in low-paying community-service jobs outside of commuting distance from their homes. About a thousand individuals were convicted for refusing to do alternative service, a federal crime (see Chapter 7 for further discussion of this issue).

A more popular way to stay out of Vietnam was to go to college. Virtually every student who maintained satisfactory progress toward his degree was classified II-S, whereby the "registrant [was] deferred because of activity in study." If the student flunked out or was graduated, he again became eligible for the draft. Of course, the student could go to graduate or professional school and continue his deferment for another several

years. Enrollment in colleges and universities increased by 6-7 percent during the war. Much of this increase was due to increased federal aid to an expanding system of higher education, patronized by a growing middle class, eager to provide advantages for their children. Nevertheless the effect was to reduce the pool of draft-eligible males by several hundred thousand.

In the early years most students were in favor of the war. For example, in 1965 only 6 percent of those polled favored immediate withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. Pro-war students picketed university teach-ins, sometimes shouted obscenities, even physically attacked participants. Conservative students petitioned for support of U.S. policy in Vietnam at campuses all over the country. Blood drives for U.S. soldiers were organized at Ohio State, Stanford and other campuses. However, none of this implied a willingness to enlist. A 1967 Gallup Poll showed that most students acknowledged that the draft discriminated against the poor, but two-thirds disagreed with a proposal that the proportions of college and non-college youths drafted should be the same.

Like the general public, student opinion turned decisively against the war after the Tet Offensive early in 1968. Between 1967 and 1969, the proportion of students calling themselves "hawks" on the war shrank from one in two to one in five. By 1969, a majority of all students thought the war was a mistake and favored immediate withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam.

Still, there was a sizeable minority who continued to support the war. Moreover, even on campuses with a strong peace movement, most students were unwilling to give up draft deferment programs and off-campus employment opportunities with the military. For example, in 1969, a majority of students at Brown, Northeastern, and Tufts (all New England schools) still supported the continuation of ROTC on campus, although in the last case without academic credit. A May 1970 Harris Poll showed that a larger plurality (37%) of all college students favored permitting ROTC with academic credit on campus than favored its complete removal (25%). Even more dramatic were the findings from the same poll that 72 percent believed that companies doing defense business should be allowed to recruit on campus and that 70 percent agreed that "school authorities are right to call in police when students occupy a building or threaten violence." College

As we counsel young men concerning military service, we must clarify for them our nation's role in Vietnam and challenge them with the alternative of conscientious objection. I am pleased to say that this is the path now being chosen by more than seventy students at my own alma mater, Morehouse College, and I recommend it to all who find the American course in Vietnam a dishonorable and unjust one. Moreover, I would encourage all ministers of draft age to give up their ministerial exemptions and seek status as conscientious objectors. These are the times for real choices and not false ones. We are at the moment when our lives must be placed on the line if our nation is to survive its own folly. Every man of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest.

—Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

campuses certainly were major centers for the storm of protest against the war. However, they also were safe sanctuaries for all students: hawks, doves, and those concerned just with their own careers.

Another strategy for avoiding military service was to go into an occupation that was draft-deferred, like medicine, teaching or the ministry. A 1970 survey by Kenneth and Mary Gergen of 5,000 students at 39 colleges and universities found that one in three had altered their career plans, many for the purpose of seeking a draft-exempt occupation. Between 1968 and 1971, occupational deferments rose by over 270,000 (124%).

Hardship deferments were granted to men who were the sole means of support for their dependents. Many men chose to marry and have children in order to avoid the draft. These strategies were known as "marrying out" and "babying out". Between 1968 and 1971, such "dependency" deferments rose by almost 420,000 (11%).

Perhaps the greatest prize for those who wished to avoid Vietnam was a IV-F classification, in which "the registrant [was] not qualified for military service." This usually was granted for reasons of illness or disability and could be obtained by failing the induction or pre-induction physical examination. Some peace organizations even counseled young men on ways to fake various illnesses. Attorneys provided draft counseling for fees ranging from \$200 to \$1,000 and for anyone who found a competent lawyer, avoiding the draft was virtually assured.

Draft counselors directed men to certain boards in order to obtain exemptions. Baskir and Strauss report: "By far the most popular place to go for a pre-induction physical was Seattle, Washington. In the latter years of the war, Seattle examiners separated people into two groups: those who had letters from doctors or psychiatrists, and those who did not. Everyone received an exemption, regardless of what the letter said."

Many of these physicians charged big fees for letters to draft boards. Antiwar doctors or medical students were well known to university students. According to Baskir and Strauss, "A careful exam by a knowledgeable specialist and an equally careful choice of a pre-induction physical site guaranteed an exemption for nine clients out of ten." Individuals could be exempted for orthodontic work as well. A dentist in Los Angeles put braces on anyone who could afford them for a cost

of between \$1,000 and \$2,000.

If the above options were not available, there were many ways to fail the physical examinations. Some faked homosexual tendencies, starved themselves to obtain an underweight disqualification, or even mutilated their own bodies by slicing off a part of their thumb or shooting themselves in the foot.

Finally, one could lower one's chances of seeing combat in Vietnam by choosing a branch of the service more removed from the action, like the Coast Guard, Navy, or Air Force. The best assignments were the Reserves and National Guard. There was a four-to-six month active duty obligation, yearly summer camps, and monthly meetings over a six-year period. More than one million Vietnam-era males became guardsmen or reservists, almost all of whom stayed home; only 15,000 (1.5%) were sent to Vietnam. Studies by the Pentagon and National Guard indicated that between 70 and 90 percent of all reservists and guardsmen were draft-motivated. It was a very popular choice for college-trained men.

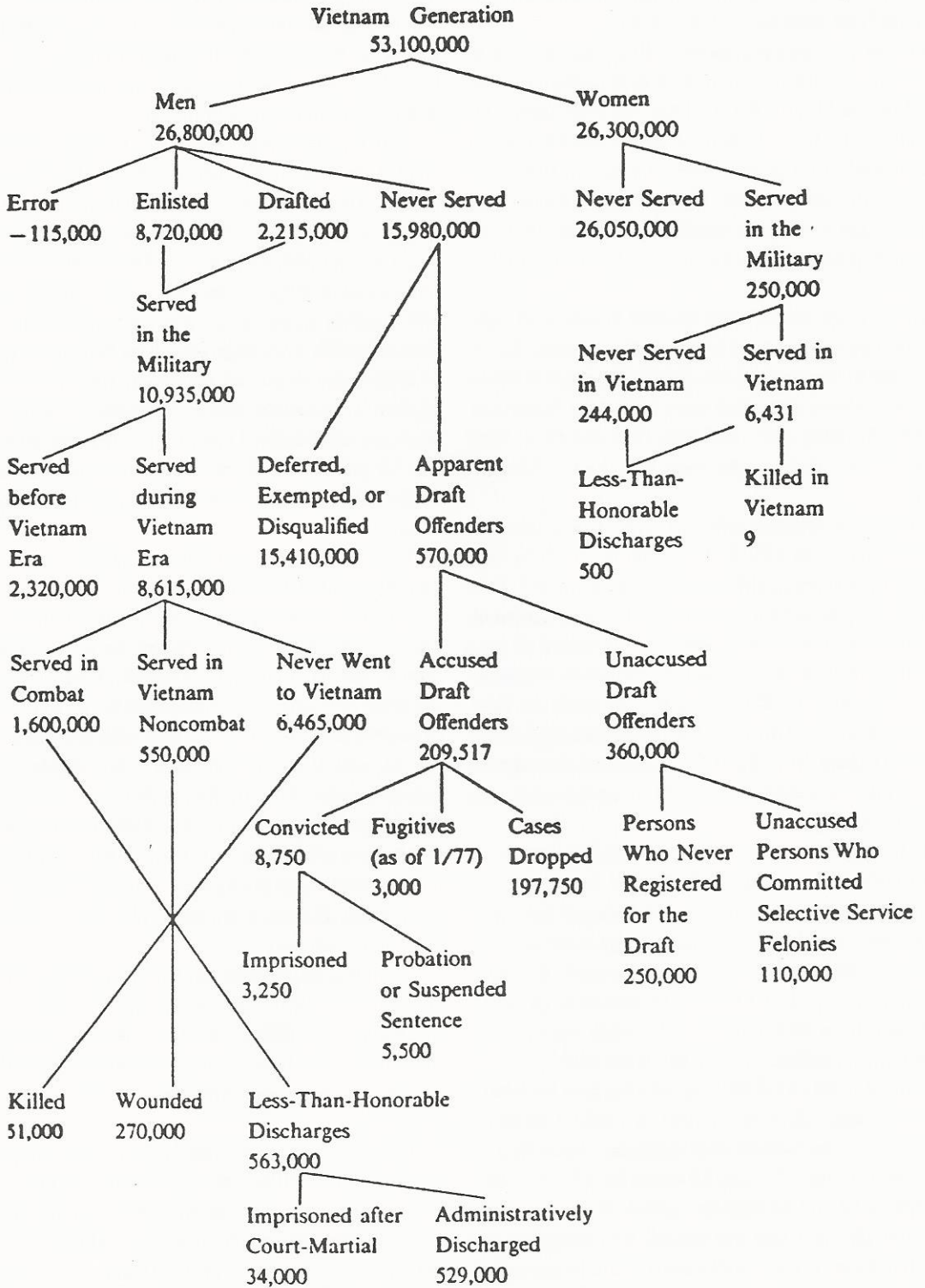
Figure 1 displays the various choices made by all members of the Vietnam generation.

In 1969, both to equalize the combat burden and to remove the threat of conscription as a motivation for protest, President Nixon established a lottery system for the draft. The lottery was based on the random selection of days of the year. The first date selected was September 14, which meant that local draft boards were required to select first all the eligible males born on that day for the January 1970 draft. Exemptions and deferments were still allowed. However, a low ranking draft number gave many young men reassurance of not being drafted and allowed everyone to plan the months ahead with more certainty.

Hardship, occupation, and student deferments were abolished by 1971. However, by that time, it made much less of a difference. The war was being turned over to the Vietnamese and draft quotas were sharply reduced. Fewer men now faced military service in Vietnam.

Throughout the war, many individuals took positive action to avoid military service. These men were much more likely to be from the higher classes of American society. They were able to escape military service by obtaining exemptions and deferments often unknown and unavailable to individuals lacking education and money.

# 1. The Vietnam Generation



As of 1991, 58, 135 are acknowledged as killed in Vietnam.